

HAMMOND, INDIANA: A LEGACY OF DIVERSITY

by: Linda Herrick Swisher



he Hammond Public Library was established in 1903 through the efforts of the Shakespeare Club, comprising many of the city's teachers. It was housed in a Hammond millinery shop. Hammond's leading citizens donated weighty tomes and magazines of interest to them and their friends. In the beginning, residents had to be recommended for membership and pay a subscription. Their names still exist in the original minutes of the library board.

Two years after the library was established, it moved into permanent quarters, furnished through the philanthropy of an immigrant from Scotland, Andrew Carnegie. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Northwest Indiana welcomed thousands of immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, who found employment in local steel mills, meat packing companies, and other industries.

To assist Hammond's indigent and immigrant populations, Brooks House of Christian Service opened in 1919, offering citizenship and English classes. A Hammond Public Library branch on the first floor introduced immigrants to the American public library. Through the years, branches were also located in schools, churches, fire stations, businesses, and hospitals.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Temple Beth-El began the Open Forum public lecture series, which brought eminent and controversial speakers to Hammond, among them W. E. B. DuBois, Clarence Darrow, and James Weldon Johnson. Library director James Alonzo Howard, was an Open Forum sponsor, and the library supplied booklists of pertinent titles for each lecture. According to the library's 1929 annual report, "foreign books" placed in circulation included German, Slovak, and Bohemian. Books in Yiddish, Polish and Hungarian were scheduled to be catalogued in 1930.

Fast forward to 1972. The library and the LaCaré Art League co-founded an annual two-day cultural festival to bring together the wide range of ethnic groups in Northwest Indiana under the theme, "Peace Through Understanding." Area residents were treated to ethnic dancers, arts and crafts, performers, and

foods. The International Culture Festival later became a separate not-for-profit organization, with several library staff serving on its board. A highlight of the Culture Festival was a naturalization ceremony to welcome new American citizens, much as Hammond's ancestors were welcomed the generation before. The annual festival was at the forefront of cultural diversity for nearly thirty years, until other cultural and ethnic organizations began hosting their own events.

The library director and head of Circulation Services still coordinate a July 4 naturalization ceremony in Harrison Park in conjunction with the city's Independence Day celebration. The library works with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in this most important event. Veterans organizations post the Colors and provide small American flags. Following the Pledge of Allegiance led by local Boy and Girl Scouts, the U. S. District Court, Northern District of Indiana is called into session. Following the ceremony, Friends of the Hammond Public Library present carnations to the new citizens. The League of Women Voters staffs a registration table. Elected officials often attend if their schedules permit.

As have Northwest Indiana's other urban industrialized areas, Hammond has had a demographic shift in the past few decades. The city's 83,000 residents are 62 percent White, 14 percent African American, and 21 percent Hispanic or Latino (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). The library tries to recruit multilingual staff when possible. Languages represented among staff include Spanish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Polish, Urdu, and American Sign Language.

The Friends of the Hammond Public Library generously sponsor African American history programs each February, and Hispanic Heritage programs from September 15 to October 15. Last year, members of Hammond's earliest African American families shared their memories. Another program featured a discussion on black filmmakers. Hispanic Heritage activities include special storytimes, Hispanic-themed films, dancers and music. An informational fair allowed agencies and organizations to introduce their services to the community.

The library director and assistant director are both members of the city's Diversity Coalition, which meets at the Main Library. The assistant director works closely with the Educational Talent Search at Purdue University Calumet. She has served on the board of the Minority Organ Tissue and Transplant Program.

A recent Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant allowed us to translate many of the library's forms and Web site pages into Spanish, and enabled us to add to our collection of Spanish-language books, magazines, newspapers and audiovisual material. Focus groups comprised of local Hispanic and Latino leaders provided input on programs, services and materials. The library has received another LSTA grant to produce six multicultural programs before June 2006.

Each semester, the Youth Outreach Librarian visits local elementary schools and youth organizations to offer storytimes and other programs. Library staff also visit the School City of Hammond's Adult Education and English as a Second Language classes. Staff describe library services, and students have the opportunity to register for library cards.

The Hammond Public Library is proud to have been the first recipient of the 1990 Peace Award for its role in the advancement of knowledge on the issues of international peace and security. This award was given by the Peace Information Exchange Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table of ALA, in conjunction with Social Issues Resources Series, Inc. The library also received the Gale Research/Ethnic Materials and Information Exchange Round Table Award in 1996.

Diversity reaches beyond cultural or ethnic boundaries. The library received the ASCLA/National Organization on Disability Award in 1992. Library workers have included students in the School City of Hammond's special education program, young adults in the city's summer work program, and workers placed through the American Association of Retired Persons. We have sponsored exhibits of art by artists with visual or hearing impairments, as well as exhibits by senior artists. Library materials are available by mail to homebound patrons of all ages. For several years, we partnered with other local organizations to bring the Names Project AIDS Awareness quilt to the library. We are a partner in Hammond Reads, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to increasing the literacy levels of Hammond's native and non-native English-speaking residents.

Participants in our many programs range from the financially secure to residents of a nearby homeless shelter. A worker at a local soup kitchen recently commented, "Your Adult Open Mic programs give all people a place to share their talents and gifts."

The Hammond Public Library has served the city for more than one hundred years. We proudly recall our legacy of service to diverse populations, while looking forward to serving all Hammond residents for generations to come.

REFERENCE LIST:

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